Screaming from the Inside

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There’s so much less to think about when you’re a kid. My biggest worries were that I would never get a Pokemon card good enough to trade for my brother’s holographic Charizard or that Kaitlyn from down the street wouldn’t be able to sleep over on any given Friday. School came easy to me and I had a small group of good friends that made the navigation of elementary and even most of middle school fairly simple, but at some point, I became self-aware. Somewhere between eighth and ninth grade, I realized that people were intimidating. The kids, now teenagers, in my grade were confident, social and, for the most part, interested in the same things. I wasn’t any of those things. I still had the same small group of friends, but I didn’t possess the same social skills as my peers and I slowly came to the realization that I was an introvert suffering from social anxiety. It wasn’t something new. It actually accounted for a lot of the loner-type behavior I exhibited as a kid, playing by myself on the swings in our backyard rather than playing toilet tag with my brother, sister and the neighbor boys. But once I was aware of it, I saw it in everything and it became hard to function without being hyper aware of my neuroses.

I still find it difficult to talk about myself. Really I find it difficult to talk at all, but talking about myself in particular is a challenge. My mind is constantly whirring, making observations and constructing feelings about the people and places surrounding me and going over and over every social encounter. More often than not I have trouble conveying all this constant thought, which makes it difficult for me to connect with people but gives me a hunger to understand them. Perhaps this is why I find so much comfort in writing. When I can’t express myself orally, there’s a freedom in filling a blank page with my thoughts and feelings on whatever most urgently leaps out of my mind or taking a break from those thoughts with a
character to be explored. I don’t consciously struggle with communication. I also don’t
consciously write from an introverted perspective. I think the observational and self-reflective
nature of my writing stems from the negotiation of my introversion and writing as a way of
connecting to what’s around me.

Nonfiction is perfectly tailored for the introverted, reflective nature of my writing. My
most successful pieces are the ones that express something I’m not able to articulate outside of
writing. My essay, “Parents are People Too,” for instance, came from a connection I have made
between my passion for football and my devotion to my family. This essay most completely
captures the introverted reflection and observation that I have found to define my writing; the
overall tone is observational, looking at my changing perspective of the role of my parents in my
life. The challenge I faced in writing this essay was finding balance between the narrative
structure of the football game and the development of my realizations about my parents. I don’t
think I reached this balance, but I’m also not entirely convinced that balance, in its generally
understood form of consisting of equal parts, is necessary. Although the narrative structure of the
football game and my personal experiences with my parents are necessary for the success of the
essay, neither are what the essay is about. The “aboutness” of this essay is the necessity of seeing
parents and adults in their humanity in order to grow up.

When it was finished, I realized that, as revolutionary as it was to me, the topic of the
essay was obvious, and I worried that it would come across as pointless. There exists in the
world of fiction the idea that there are only seven basic plots with which to write. It is supposed
that these plots must be the basis of any work of fiction and it is the author’s role to interpret
them as he will. While I haven’t done much research on this subject myself, I believe that the
idea of drawing inspiration from a similar pool as fellow writers, who I’m sure have reached the
same conclusion, doesn’t make reusing a topic pointless. What makes anything worth reading is the author’s unique perspective and their indulgence of the impulse to write. “Parents are People Too” does reach a conclusion that is blatantly obvious to anyone who has already reached it, but it can probably be said that they didn’t reach it from a rowdy football crowd. It’s my individual take on it that made the essay something worth writing, and hopefully worth reading.

The two other nonfiction pieces in the collection, “Friday Nights” and “Broken,” required a similar reflective tone that was well served by my introverted and observational nature. These pieces, however, rely heavily on the narrative structure that was secondary to the function of “Parents are People Too.” All three pieces look back at an event and reflect on its significance in a broader context, but both “Friday Nights” and “Broken” focus on concrete details and narrative style. Each is framed differently, “Broken” by my consideration of my dynamic relationship with my little sister and “Friday Nights” by the narrative of a specific Friday night football game. What defines these pieces for me is that they’re like written documentation of my growth as a person and a writer. They highlight memorable moments, like my affection for my brother, or acknowledge a growth in human understanding, like my evolving relationships with my parents and sister. They work out things that occupy my mind daily, providing a catharsis not only for relieving that constant mental whirring, but also for the compulsion to write.

My introverted perspective can be seen in my short stories as well, although not as clearly. Because most of my fiction doesn’t take the same direct approach in getting to its “aboutness,” the place of observation and introversion becomes more obscure. I believe it is the writer’s role to observe and document the world around them. When I’m writing fiction, my aim is to make readers reach some sort of conclusion in a subtler way. My introversion plays into my
short stories differently, usually manifested through character and description rather than particular observations and the exploration of my own thought processes.

Though many of my short stories concern the theme of family, a lot of my stories and characters consider families different than the one I am most familiar with. I come from a traditional, nuclear family, including my mom, dad, brother and sister. As I interact with more people, my definition of family expands, but it was never a conscious decision when I was writing to write about families that look different or similar to mine. I found a story to tell and the characters just happened to come from a range of different family backgrounds.

In “Fallout,” the main character, Penny, lives with her dad. Her father, Michael, is the character I most identify with. He’s soft-spoken and has difficulty expressing himself and most clearly represents my own shy form of introversion. It was interesting to navigate their interactions when writing the story with this connection to Michael; while there was an obvious rapport between them, much of it was underneath the surface. I thought it would be interesting to see how a character without the ability to express himself would interact with someone close to him. Because he’s so closed off, much of their rapport stems from Penny’s interpretation of his behavior. She sees his concern for her as an expression of affection, which is exactly what it is. Michael functions in this story as the introvert, but I think what made it intriguing for me to write was figuring out how Michael, as an introvert, interacts with Penny, who is more on the extroverted end of the social spectrum. Although I have a closer connection with Michael personally, the story follows Penny and much of the exposition is filtered through her memories and observations. I didn’t realize as I was writing, but despite the design of Michael’s character as an introvert, it is Penny who serves as the voice for exposition and offers observations on her surroundings. Exposition is generally necessary for the success of a story, and Penny gives the
story depth and movement. I hadn’t considered, however, the implications of exploring the inner life of a character who wasn’t an introvert when another character is meant to embody that type of behavior. Her interactions with Doug, Andy, and Michael show that she’s more socially skilled than her father. The reader isn’t privy to Michael’s point of view, only to his shy and, at times, awkward behavior, which, in contrast to the relative ease of Penny’s interactions, is enough to set them apart. The story juxtaposes the inner life of the extrovert with the outer life of the introvert, in a way.

“Those People” explores another relatively unconventional family. The catalyst for this story is the tumultuous relationship between a single mother and her teenage daughter Shelby. This was a difficult story to wrap my head around because I never quite reached the level of self-righteous teenage angst that Shelby exhibits in the beginning. As a teenager, I toed the line. I got good grades and pretty much accepted what my parents laid out for me, so I was curious what a different dynamic would look like. I always saw the “parents are the enemy” mindset as immature, and I worry that because I never held that view, my portrayal of Shelby as melodramatic and selfish is more like a caricature than an honest representation of what that attitude looks like. I actually identify more with her mother’s point of view than with Shelby’s. At the very least, establishing her in this way gives her character a place from which to grow.

My uneasiness with Shelby’s first introduction is quelled by the fact that the central relationship of the story is not between mother and daughter, but between Shelby and Uncle Teddy. Teddy’s place in the family is unusual, playing the role of a quasi-adopted brother to Shelby’s mother. The relationships between any of the characters in this story can be characterized as including a dependent and a provider. Shelby is dependent on her mother. Teddy is also dependent on Shelby’s mother, and, because they happen to meet, Teddy is dependent on
Shelby. When they aren’t involved in conversation, Shelby is considering her surroundings, such as when she’s in Wal Mart wondering about the circumstances of other shoppers. Her observations, in contrast to Penny’s in “Fallout” are shallow and short-lived as she reorients her thought processes to focus on herself - until she is embarrassed by Uncle Teddy. With him, Shelby experiences the role of the provider and is able to gain an understanding of her mother’s experience in that role.

The last story in the collection, “Ramona,” was the most challenging and rewarding to write. I loved the idea of writing about a bigger family because it can be such a complex dynamic. While it still explores the way different families function together and follows my usual writing style for the most part, this story features quite a bit of dialogue. The beginning of the story is heavy with exposition that sets up Mel’s condition and introduces the members of his family, which is the writing perspective I’m most comfortable with. Once Mel’s voice is introduced to the text, it becomes more focused on dialogue and the interaction between the characters than on description. He takes over the narrative, telling Delilah’s story within his dialogue. This departure was difficult for me to achieve because while I am always aiming to understand my characters I typically end up trying to explain their decision processes with descriptive paragraphs and little dialogue. Writing Delilah’s story in Mel’s voice was difficult and rewarding because it gave me a chance to stretch my abilities. Conversation is a personal challenge I face, so I typically use as little as possible in my writing out of fear that it will sound unnatural or not convey what I intend it to. I knew when I was writing “Ramona” that the dialogue would be integral to establishing the family relationships as well as identifying each individual character with their own voice and mannerisms. I had never written anything with so many characters, so it was important for me to try to show how they were unique rather than just
explicitly saying, which still made its way into the story. Old habits die hard, but I’m so glad I
stretched myself because the resulting story feels personal and intimate, which is so rewarding.

It takes a lot for me to reach the connective feeling I get when writing. By allowing my
mind to sift through the detritus of every day social interactions, both meaningless and
meaningful, writing has offered me a way to first come to an understanding of people and
eventually, hopefully, really connect with them. I can be passionate about an event, idea, person,
lifestyle, thought, or whatever the case may be and have no ability to communicate that passion
even with people who share it. It’s immensely frustrating to find myself socially inept when it
feels like the key to connecting with my generation. Writing has given me an alternative.
Part I: Nonfiction
Parents are People Too

Watching football with my dad has led me to several conclusions about how to view the world. You can’t let other people tell you what to care about. If the Browns matter to you, then by all means wear the bulldog mask and lament your choices. Realizing the humanity in the fallibility of referees, however, might be the most revolutionary idea I’ve ever been introduced to. I can’t recall a single game during which my dad couldn’t be heard screaming at the TV in the kitchen at a botched call or a biased officiating crew. He may be the only one in the family hollering at people who can’t hear him, but the crowd at the opening game of my alma mater’s 2014 season proved that he’s not alone in his sentiments.

The game was an even back and forth, a Hornets score for a Generals score, defensive stand for defensive stand. A missed extra point left the Hornets with a one-point deficit and their opponents with the ball with half a quarter left to play. The clock-chewing drive that ensued was met with groans from spectators as the Generals charged down the field, landing themselves twenty yards from sealing their victory and less than two minutes on the clock. We felt the pressure to get the ball out of their hands and we thought we had done just that.

The ball was loose and not a fan was left seated as both teams piled on, scrambling for possession. The pile dispersed and the ball came out in the hands of a Hornet, but the whoops and hollers quickly turned into a violent round of boos as the head ref motioned in the opposite direction. The clock ran down and the Generals took home the win, twenty to twenty one, but our crowd didn’t go quietly. Another round of boos followed the end of the game. Fans refused to leave their seats and the student section grew rowdy, all of this culminating in the refs being escorted out of the stadium by sheriff’s deputies. They shuffled past the students, ignoring the
continued hiss of the crowd with their heads down, avoiding the arms reaching down from the stands and the mini foam footballs being pelted at them.

Similar to how I think about the entertainment value of football when a stadium sits silently watching a fifteen year old sprawled on the ground surrounded by medical staff, that night I sat and thought about what those refs signed up for. I’m not going to lie and say I didn’t join in the ruckus. There’s a mob mentality to a football crowd that gives you the responsibility to keep the zebras honest, let them know when they’ve done wrong by your team because they can’t throw a flag on the crowd. I had bought into that mentality before, but it was as if when they slipped on those zebra stripes and knee high socks, they surrendered their status as people. People and refs were two different things and a group primarily consisting of grown men was acting like children. Did they get the call wrong? Unquestionably. Human error is an inevitable aspect of any endeavor. Just as a player is likely to make a mistake and grab a facemask or jump off the line, a referee is likely to miss a call. Sometimes those calls are big.

It typically only takes me until the post-game burger to shake off a loss, but several weeks, and several wins later, it was still gnawing at me. The loss didn’t mean much to the season and it isn’t certain we would have won even with the chance. I couldn’t separate myself from the reputation my community must have in the minds of those refs. We acted like children. I felt guilty for participating in the mob mentality that had these men fearing retaliation for not just a mistake, but a mistake concerning a recreational sport. A high school recreational sport. Somewhere around three weeks after the fact, I realized that if this behavior called children to mind, then parents must be woefully ill-equipped without a police escort or at least the parental equivalent. Why then haven’t I felt guilty for not realizing the same humanity existed within my parents?
This isn’t to say that I willfully ignore the fact that my parents are people. In fact, I think it’s safe to say that everyone can be sure their parents are human. It’s simply a newly developed perspective on a previously one-dimensional one. If getting older isn’t about adding dimension to your understanding of the world, what the heck is it good for?

Kids have the wonderfully unique opportunity to see things incompletely. They view the world through a narrow lens, one that expands with the acquisition of wisdom. Excluded from that narrow view is the people responsible for them. As a kid, and even a young adult the tendency is to self-focus. It doesn’t fit into the childhood notion of parenthood to know that your mom feels insecure or that your dad feels vulnerable. At least it didn’t fit into mine. Dad was a superhero and mom was the happy homemaker. He fixed everything that broke and she fixed us when we broke. Their being broken didn’t fit into anything. But like those rabid fans, I held onto that un-amended lens, the incomplete one, allowing myself to believe in a world where I am the center of their universe and they’re not the center of their own.

Witnessing the crowd’s unfettered disregard for the officiating crew seemed ludicrous, to disregard any person is terrible, but there’s a widespread, almost societal expectation that allows children this illusion. Parents surrender themselves to a new title, a new purpose with the introduction of their “bundle of joy.” It’s because of this, I think, that the idea of your parents as human individuals, takes some development. My parents have always been human and since I’ve been cognizant of such things, I’ve known this. I just haven’t necessarily considered the implications. Once they’ve surrendered themselves to this role, an emotional disconnect is formed. There are aspects of my parents’ lives that are deemed not pertinent to my growing understanding of the world. Until they are pertinent, that is.
I’ve reached an age where my relationship with my parents is changing. They’ve given me what they can as far as coddling and small life lessons and it’s evolved into seeing what being an adult looks like. The notion of parents, and adults in general, as having it all together is utterly false, though when you’re younger they’d have you believe otherwise. There needs to be some sort of hierarchical structure. They may get to this point at the other end, where their children are able to appreciate their humanity and perhaps feel like they lost themselves in the melee, as my mom does. Or maybe, despite the outstanding product before them, they feel as though they haven’t done well enough or provided enough, as my dad does. Either way, excluding the numerous outcomes in which sanity and self-esteem make it through parenthood unscathed, a situation with which I have no familiarity, the vulnerability of the human condition applies to parents too. I can only assume that at some point us young adults are just expected to reach this blatantly obvious conclusion. But until then, we’re left to figure it out on our own, let us arrive late to the party. If you can call adulthood a party.

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**Friday Nights**

The stadium lights flicker out. Screams from the hill next to the stands pierce the cool, September air. This is our big night. The glow stick show. We’ve been practicing for weeks. Extra after-school practices, going over old drills, combing through every detail three times over. It’s go time.

I can’t help but smile, going back over the game as I wait for the drum cue. It was spectacular. Nobody in the band cares much for football. They’re more interested in the third
quarter cookies than our undefeated team. But then they don’t have brothers in the starting lineup. The tuts from the snare drum force me to focus.

The show goes off without a hitch. Xs and Os, pinwheels, slow turns and our signature band dance featuring flailing legs to accentuate the glow sticks taped around our ankles. All executed perfectly. We stand at attention, waiting for the lights to come back on. I hear the pounding of cleats on the grass. The football team had come to watch us perform. They run past on their way back to the locker room. I see my brother, several squads away, scanning their faces.

“Where’s Kelly?” he half whispers, half yells as he moves on. I’m the last one in the front line. He finds me, and wraps me up in a bear hug, lifting me off the ground. I’m crushed by his sweaty, but febrezed, shoulder pads. He sets me down, and before running to meet the rest of his team, points to me, and yells, “That’s my sister!”

The flutes surrounding me erupt into a chorus of “Aws.”

“That was the cutest thing I’ve ever seen,” one of them said.

That’s going to stick. I won’t remember the drills I marched, the songs I played or the score of the game. I’ll remember my brother.

Broken

The baby of the family always seems to have an unspoken control over the parents, and Sarah is no exception. The only sibling with the expressed genes of my dad’s side of the family,
red hair and freckles covering both arms and face, it was inevitable that Sarah inherited a personality to match. Fiery from birth and infamous in the neighborhood for temper tantrums and her incredible ability to scream at inhuman volumes, Sarah spent her first six years building a reputation for herself.

This reputation, and the psychology of sibling interaction, leads to a disgruntled ten-year-old me begging for peace on a hot summer day.

“Mo-om,” I whine, “They’re *my* friends. She can’t play with us.”

“It’s a nice day out. She’s gonna be outside. Learn to get along.”

Cue the stern sideways looks from Mom. Argument over. Stomping through the yard, lamenting my terrible plight as the victim of a tag-along, I look over my shoulder and shoot Sarah the dirtiest look I can muster. She skips along behind, blissfully unaware of my anger, exulting in her chance to play with the big kids. With each hop, the deep orange ringlets blanketing her head bounce in unison, catching the sunlight. A playful grin widens between her chubby, dimpled cheeks. I imagine our dialogue went something like this:

“What’re we gonna do, Kel?” she asks me.

“I don’t know,” I bark, “You can do whatever you want. *We’re* playing in the tower.”

“But mom said…”

“Don’t care.”

When did her dynamic with me transform from kid sister to friend? When you’re little, there’s nothing worse than sharing friends with siblings, but the process of growing up in the same home, loving the same people must plant something in the back of a child’s mind. A switch
God eventually flicks, revealing nuisances as allies. In 2002, the switch remained off, Sarah maintaining her position as an annoyance.

We meet our neighbor Kennedy and her friend Mary by the tree stump at the property line. Kennedy was our neighbor and my best friend, and it required no words to communicate how I felt about Sarah’s presence, but she knew better than to say anything. She had been witness to many of Sarah’s fits, and nobody was ready to deal with one today.

The tower sits in the corner of a grassy field in our backyard, an addition to our standard play set made up of two swings, monkey bars and a slide. Dad built the large three tiered structure to go with it. The main part of the set was a gift, outgrown by the neighbor kids and hoisted by our parents over the fence separating our yards. I was too young to remember him building the tower, but Dad’s always been a jack of all trades, able to fix anything that breaks and build anything else we need from scratch. His addition is simple. The bottom level sits a few feet off the ground. Three wooden rungs lead to a small platform and three more lead to the top. To the right is a space that used to be open, now with a wide board across the middle, the product of a tumble I took at four years old. A bright blue tarp forms a V-shape overhead for the roof. A rope ladder hangs down the front, a rope swing from a two-by-four protruding from the top level. The structure as a whole is unimpressive, yet immensely meaningful. Each nail in each board placed by dad for our entertainment. Here we spent our days, playing “Barbie mansions” and pretending to be queens looking out over our kingdom.

We somehow convinced Sarah to entertain herself on the swings and ignored my brother and his friends climbing trees in the woods to the right of us while we occupied ourselves with a favorite pastime: squishing bees. Every summer the field filled with the yellow heads of dandelions peeking through the grass. If I sat still long enough, I could see the bees flying every
direction in search of the right flower. Rarely ever killing one, we stomped near a bee and ran for our lives.

Sarah enjoyed watching us, and we heard an occasional sarcastic comment or had to dodge a crab apple hurled at us from the peanut gallery in the trees. It was during this game that Sarah lost focus on her swinging. I watched as she flipped backwards off the swing, landing sideways on her arm. Time stopped. My heart felt like it would beat out of my chest. In that split second, my ten-year-old, inexperienced mind realized how fragile she was. She stood up, brushing the dried dirt off her shirt. Her round face was bewildered, her brain assessing the situation, figuring out how she should react. She cradled her right arm against her bulging toddler belly.

“It’s broken,” she said calmly.

The “big kids” converged, surrounding her as she sat herself back on the swing. One eye squinted, straining against the glare of the sun, she peered up at us, waiting for someone to do something.

“It’s broken,” she repeated, becoming annoyed by our seeming indifference.

“You’re lying,” Kennedy said, Mary echoing her agreement.

The three of them began arguing, resulting in Sarah stomping toward the house crying, her arm still cradled to her chest. Apparently I inherited some of the Kunze dramatics. I rounded on Kennedy, tears burning my eyes.

“How dare you say that to her?” I screamed.

“She didn’t break her arm.”
She looked bewildered at the sudden passion I exhibited. “You’re not allowed to make my sister cry. Get out of my yard.” Melodramatic words spoken by a scared ten year old.

I’d never been as angry with anyone as I was at that moment. The two of them shouted protests, but I ignored them. Turning my back, I began walking to the house. I felt my cheeks burning red with anger. I stopped to visit with our dog, Lady, in her area behind the burn pile. As I knelt next to her, her bushy white tail thwapping against my back, I thought about the last question Kennedy venomously hurled at me as she stalked back to her house.

“Do you really think she broke her arm? You’re all a bunch of babies!”

Of course not, I wanted to yell back, but she’s my sister. You can’t make my sister cry unless you live here.

She hadn’t cried. She didn’t scream, or throw a fit. She didn’t do anything. I’d seen her throw worse fits after stubbing her toe or having to share her markers. She was just looking for some attention, which she got. As I continued my leisurely walk to the house, I heard the hinges squeak as the back porch door was forced open.

“KELLY MARIE!” I heard my mother yell.

Oh crap. That’s never a good sign.

“COMING!” Another squeak and the door slammed shut.

The middle name call meant that I sprinted the rest of the way, doom building with every step. As I walked through the front door, I quickly scanned the living room. Sarah sat on the couch, arm resting on a tower of pillows. My mom walked into the room, purse in one hand,
keys in the other. The middle name call was more of an urgent appeal rather than an indication that I was in trouble. Dad sat in the kitchen, changing out of his green-tinted lawn mowing shoes.

My parents and Sarah piled into our rusty black mini-van, and headed to Medina General, leaving my brother and me home alone. Chris and I watched re-runs of *The Animaniacs* and *Pinky and the Brain*, not giving much thought to what was happening at the hospital.

Five hours later, they returned, Sarah sporting a pink cast, looking at me triumphantly as she walked past me to our shared bedroom. With Sarah fast asleep in her room, the rest of us gathered in the living room as mom explained what happened. Sarah broke her wrist, a clean break. Angry tears spilled from mom’s eyes as she explained how the doctors manually set the bone even though the anesthetic didn’t work. I cringed thinking of Sarah’s screams. I didn’t like the idea of her being in pain.

“I was so pissed,” mom said.

The doctors made her wait in the hall. I can’t imagine the agony she was experiencing, but dad’s ever-present calm created balance. He was angry, but made sure he was allowed to stay with her. This incident was our family’s first and last experience with Medina General. One bad memory is enough. Too shaken up to cook, mom ordered pizza. That night, the five of us cuddled into my and Sarah’s bunk beds, eating our pizza, and watched *The Parent Trap*.

The cohesiveness produced by an event like this in a family is almost inherent, each individual reaction representing the role we play. A broken arm is minor, but it’s enough to bring into focus the fragility of life. As a child, I viewed things through an untrained lens, drawing conclusions based on the limited experience of my ten years. Sarah’s broken wrist allowed me to mature, however slightly, and widen that lens. True to form, Sarah’s drama continued for years
after this incident, but she’s since outgrown the inclination to make everything a spectacle.

Plenty of other things influenced the development of my relationship with my sister, but none resonate as much as realizing how much I cared about that tiny six year old.
Part II: Fiction
Fallout

“Dad, the sky-scrapers are here,” Penny calls from her perch in the front window.

“Just tell them the worst is over the garage and barn. And don’t let them talk you into the lawn service. It’s a crock.”

They didn’t need telling. She grabs her folding chair, setting herself up in front of the garage to watch the men work, a welcome break from the daily grind. The patch of grass supporting her chair is sparse from the habit. The sky-scrapers have become a part of the weekly routine. Tuesdays are trash-pickup, Fridays, sky-scraping.

Penny enjoyed watching their methodical process. She’d grown used to spending her Friday afternoons with Doug and Andy. Their presence today was a distraction from the packing she’d been putting off for weeks. She tosses a water bottle to each of them and plops down, spreading her research across her lap and listening to their complaints about work. It was typical of sky-scrapers to monopolize conversations with discussions of the Fallout.

“Nah, man. You’re so wrong,” Doug says.

“Nuh-uh. You gotta look at the big picture, bro.”

“Andy, I’m tired’a looking at the big picture. I don’t care what’s gonna happen anymore.”

“That’s bleak, man.” Andy shakes his head, Penny giggling from below.

“I mean, aren’t you tired of doing this? It’s been five years! Blackledge can say things are great, job creation or whatever, but I’m so tired of messing with this slop.” Doug turns his shovel over, allowing the contents to fall back to the roof. “If only it didn’t rain,” he mumbles.

Ignoring the remarks, Andy continues guiding the blue sludge toward the gutters, immune to Doug’s constant criticism of the government.
Doug turns away, climbing to the peak of the roof. He spreads his arms, and looking up to the gaping black hole interrupting the sheet of blue, yells, “The sky is falling and I DON’T CARE!” Mrs. Marzullo glares from next door as she encourages Duchess to “make a poo-poo.”

“Tell us how you really feel, Doug,” Penny calls.

He palms a handful of sky debris, preparing to launch it at her. He stops mid-swing, Danny jumping from his seat in the dump truck that idles in the driveway.

“Drop it!”

Reality strikes the young trio. Doug’s cheeks redden as he releases the chunk of sky from his gloved hand. Andy backs away, removing himself from blame. Penny sinks deeper into her folding chair. Her dad peeks through the kitchen blinds, his interest piqued by the commotion.

“What are you thinking?” Danny screams, the deep coarseness of his voice commanding attention. “Do you realize we’re under a level two Sky Alert? What would’ve happened if you threw that?” Doug’s head hangs in shame. “C’mon . . . level two, what would’ve happened?”

“Mild burns and rash,” he replies.

“That’s right. Mild burns. Is this girl wearing a protective suit?”

“No, boss. But I . . .”

“No, she’s not. Apologize.”

“Sorry, Penny.”

She’s unable to move, frozen in her chair by the authority in Danny’s voice, weighed down by the tension in the air. She nods her head in Doug’s direction.

“Off the roof, Sherman. You’re done for the week.”

“What? Boss, I was just joking around.”
“You think this is funny,” he gestures to the hole in the sky, exasperated. “Alright, Chicken Little, off the roof.” He stalks back to the truck, mumbling about “kids these days.” Penny shoots Doug an apologetic look as he sidles past. Andy stifles laughter from his seat on the edge of the roof.

“Something funny, Cooper?” Danny bellows.

“Nah, boss. It’s just . . . Chicken Little . . . he was scared of . . .” More stifled laughter.

“Oh, shut it, Andy. Get back to work or you’re off the job, too.” Penny takes advantage of the action, packing up her chair, migrating indoors. She resumes her seat in the front window, watching her favorite part of the process from afar. Andy finishes the scraping by himself while Danny parks the truck parallel to the garage’s front, the bed sitting beneath the gutters. He waits as Andy sweeps the muck along the gutter into the bed of the truck. The rhythm of sky hitting truck calms Penny. She shuts her eyes, straining to hear it through the walls, a thundering bass drum interrupting the quiet of rural Ohio.

Penny’s father interrupts her peace. “Shouldn’t you be packing?”

“I’ll get it done.”

“You’re leaving tomorrow, kiddo.” He sits on the arm of the couch, studying the solemn look on her face.

“Yes, dad.” Penny sighs, abandoning her post in the window. “I’ll get to it on my own, ok?”

“You don’t have to sigh at me all the time,” he says, sighing himself. “Are Doug and Andy coming over to say goodbye?” She nods her head passively.

“I can’t pack up your whole life for you. I might do it wrong.” Penny laughs at her father’s insecurity. “You can’t do it wrong, dad.”
He folds his arms tightly, a stern look on his face. “Penny Elaine Kauffman, get in there and pack your things… now.”

Penny mirrors her father, “Michael John Kauffman, not gonna happen.”

They erupt into laughter. Penny collapses next to him on the couch.

“I wish I could still get away with saying stuff like that.”

“Too bad I’m a grown up now.” She scrutinizes her father’s face. He’s staring at his hands, the crow’s feet sprouting from his eyes twitch slightly. The preceding weeks had been difficult for him, preparing to send his only daughter across the country for her first “big girl job.” Fatherhood had never come easy to Michael. He loved Penny, but expressing it was a struggle. She watches him twist his wedding ring, his muscles fighting against the words she imagined his brain screaming. In the silence she hears the familiar soft thud of sky on roof.

“You know I’ll call all the time.”

“Just try and get some packing done, alright? I want you to have a good start.” He rises from the couch, surrendering the moment in favor of his gruff facade.

When Doug and Andy arrive at six o’ clock, the stacks of boxes cluttering the single story home remain untouched. They sit at the kitchen table, discussing the events of the day over Oreos and milk, awaiting the pizza they ordered.

“So? What happened?” Penny asks.

“Corrective action,” Doug replies solemnly.

“No more declarations of apathy for this kid,” Andy jokes. “I don’t know what you were thinking, though.”

“I don’t know. I’m tired of being responsible for the Fallout. You know what they call us when we’re hired? ‘Fallout Specialists’,” he waves his hands above his head in mock excitement.
Andy shakes his head, “I hear ya, but it’s a pretty big deal what we’re doing. Maybe our crater isn’t so big, but look at China, California, places like that. The reports Danny got last week are depressing.”

“Yeah, I read ‘em. What’d you expect though? Those places had the worst air quality in the world until it got so bad. Of course they have no sky left.”

Penny tries to imagine what it would be like without a sky, an eternal night. She can hardly remember how things were when there was. Few people have memories involving the sky, it served more as an overlooked background, that is, until it started falling. Her memory of the “Pre-Pollution Fallout Era”, as history textbooks now called it, was spotty, made up of small, out-of-context clips. She remembers the chill of grass against her back. A giant oak casting a shadow over her as she studies the clouds, assigning specific shapes to each.

She blinks, now the wind whips through her hair, her dad in the driver’s seat, her mother, the passenger. The comforting pressure of their legs cocooning her between them. They race clouds along the highway, adrenaline pumping through her blood as their speed increases. Following these memories is the first after the destruction of the sky. She sits next to her father, fighting tears. Her mother rests in a casket, a hole in the earth below her, another in the sky above, both fresh.

“See, what blows my mind is how wrong everybody was,” Andy says. Penny leaves the painful memory, drawn back into Doug and Andy’s dialogue. She found difficulty in maintaining focus during these conversations. Her research gave her plenty of opportunities to wonder how to fix these problems but Doug and Andy provide a break.

“We know less than we thought we did. Example,” he says, extending his index finger in emphasis, “we didn’t think the sky could break apart and fall.”
“We didn’t know our smoke clouds would fall out of the sky and burn us alive,” Doug contributes.

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” Penny adds, “but you’re right.”

“I hear ya, but scientists don’t know how to explain anything anymore, ya know? No offense, Pen, but if they’re wrong about something like this, who knows what’s next?” Andy begins a rant against the scientific community, Doug nodding along his silent Amens.

Penny’s thoughts drift again. She looks out the window, studying the jagged edge separating bright blue and deep black. Like the sky-scrapers, it’s part of her world, a world that is literally falling apart. She can’t decide if they’ve come one step closer to the universe or the universe one step closer to swallowing them whole. Or maybe God’s eye will peek through, as if somehow their carelessness exposed the connection between Heaven and Earth. Maybe that was hope. Hope that somehow this was all part of a plan. Penny keeps this to herself, attempting to spare Doug and Andy the weight of her existential wonderings. She tried to have fun with them, embracing what she thought the inherent nature of a twenty-something should be.

“Chicken Little . . .” Doug chuckles, “how hard is it to get that joke right?” Their discussion of scientific ignorance had passed. “Danny’s an idiot.”

They spend the rest of the evening like this, eating pizza, talking about life. They tease Doug as he details his steamy two-week relationship with Bernice, the thirty-four-year-old Subway sandwich artist. Andy explains his latest adventure to downtown Cleveland in search of a topic for his documentary. Why he ignored his privileged position as a Fallout Specialist for this purpose was beyond Penny. It comes time for them to leave, the trio congregating on the front porch steps, dragging out the worst part of their last evening together.
“See ya, Penny,” Doug says gruffly. He looks at his shoes, guiding a tiny pebble in circles with his toe. Penny chuckles. He often reminded her of her dad, avoiding the things he most wanted to say.

“I’ll see ya, Doug.” A fist bump and he sulks back to the car.

“You’ll do great,” Andy says, rolling his eyes at their friend. “And I don’t hate having an excuse to see the West Coast.”

“I’m gonna miss you guys. Make sure Doug knows that.” Penny throws an arm around Andy, squeezing.

“You’ll keep busy, fancy new Atmospheric Engineer and all that. First of her kind at twenty five!” he yells to no one. Penny cringes. She can almost hear the growls of Mrs. Marzullo and Duchess, their peace disturbed yet again. “I’ve heard Washington’s great, anyways,” Andy says, now with his indoor voice, “so there’s that, even if we’re not there.”

“Thanks, Andy. Do me a favor though? Keep an eye on my dad.”

“You got it.” One last hug and he’s in the car with Doug, placing a comforting slap on his back.

Penny smiles. Standing in the doorway, she watches her friends leave, honking the horn wildly. Two down, one to go. Her father sits just inside the door, watching the Browns fail magnificently. She walks past reluctantly, resigning herself to the stacks of empty boxes and piles of unpacked belongings. He checks on her several times throughout the night, each coinciding with his nighttime potty breaks. She slowly unburies herself until, at three in the morning, nothing remains to be packed.

Four hours of sleep and one pancake breakfast later, Penny stands in the driveway, her father inspecting the brakes of her mother’s old truck, avoiding her gaze at all costs. A weathered
tarp covers the boxes filling the back, tied down by bungee cords and thick rope. He stands, abandoning his mechanical analysis, and faces his daughter.

“Go easy on the brakes. They’ll hold up for a while if you’re nice to ‘em.”

“Ok.”

“Call me if you need money or . . . anything.” He kicks around an acorn resting on the pavement between them. Penny kicks it across the driveway.

“Bye Dad.”

“How’d it go with the sky-scrapers? That Doug kid…”

“Dad . . .” she says firmly, “I have to go. I’m on a schedule.”

He nods solemnly, opening her car door. “I’ll hold down the fort.”

She climbs into the driver’s seat, the engine roaring to life. Michael takes a step back, standing with arms folded in the front yard.

“Bye, kiddo.”

Penny’s speed steadily increases. She’s coming from behind. She breathes a sigh of relief and anticipation, racing toward the lone cumulous cloud floating among the expanding black.

Those People

The wind slams the door behind me. An unintended but fitting effect. Nature rages with me. I sidestep the patches of snow turning to slush as I make my way to the car. The old
thermometer on the face of the garage tells me its forty degrees. Too warm for a coat. My Ohio State sweatshirt over an old t-shirt will combat Ohio’s bipolar weather just fine.

A pair of eyes peek through a small slit in the yellowed blinds on the front door. I make a point not to give her the satisfaction of looking back as I peel out of the driveway. I don’t know where I’m going.

A worship song floats out of the radio. I angrily plug my phone into the auxiliary cord, the quiet acoustics of “Strong Tower” interrupted by the blood-pumping percussive melodies of “We’re Not Gonna Take It.” I can’t help but feel guilty, the sort of guilt that probably indicates I should switch it back, but the poetry of God’s love isn’t exactly conducive to the blind rage I’m nursing.

All I wanted was one night. One night where it didn’t have to be a fight. One night for me to have. Mothers never seem to understand. At least mine doesn’t. Is it too much to ask that I get one night to relax without being hounded to drag my little brother around, or clean the kitchen or shovel the driveway or whatever other soul-sucking chore she comes up with? This isn’t how high school is supposed to be. I’m nearly eighteen. She was this age at one point, although her current behavior suggests it was sometime during the Stone Age.

I hadn’t realized how late it was getting. The sun was still hovering above the house when I left. Now the darkness is growing thicker, swallowing the sign that marks the start of Medina County. It glows green as I pass. My headlights barely carve out the fields and farmhouses that daylight has taught me are there. The fields seem to roll on forever, only interrupted by the occasional cluster of trees. The coins in the cup holder vibrate with my phone. A text from my mother.
“Please be careful.”

Full punctuation and everything. Stone Age texting. I toss the phone onto the passenger seat with every intention of following the instruction. When I look up there’s a man in the road. My foot reflexively moves to the brake. My body leans hard into the steering wheel. The back end of my car sways on the pavement as the tired brakes fight the forward momentum. My panic mutes their screeching until the car lurches to a stop. The man hasn’t moved. He just now glances up, squinting into the yellow light. He looks haggard. His face is buried beneath a wild beard. Tufts of peppered hair jut out from underneath his tattered Cleveland Browns cap. His jeans and shirt hang off his body, giving the impression he hasn’t eaten in days. He’s missing a shoe. The one he still has is old and missing the laces and the tongue flaps with each movement. I step onto the salt-stained asphalt.

“Uncle Teddy?”

He shades his eyes with his hand, “Shelby? ’S that you?”

He stumbles forward, leaning on the car for support.

“What are you doing out here?” I ask.

“Hmm? Where am I?”

“Uncle Teddy, what are you doing in the middle of the road? I could’ve killed you!”

Anger rises in my chest as I walk back to the car to retrieve my phone. “I’m calling the cops.”
Miraculously gaining control of his motor functions, Teddy lurches forward, pulling at my hands. “No! Shelby. Hey. You don’t gotta do that. I’m fine.” He attempts a charming smile and a string of drool to falls onto his shirt. He giggles.

“You’re drunk,” I say as I begin dialing, “And you’re not my problem.”

Uncle Teddy leaps forward, taking my phone, holding it above his head in one hand, and using the other to keep me at arm’s length. “Come on, kid. Please. Throw me a bone here. You know I been working on stuff. It’s just a bad night. I ain’t even driving. Just tryna get home.”

“Get in,” I sigh. “My mother would kill me if she knew I got you arrested, anyway.” I mumble.


“Lost it in a bet.”

I stopped asking questions a long time ago. Teddy’s not really my uncle. He and my mother grew up together. She’s never told me what happened to his parents, but he was adopted by my grandparents when he was nine. According to her, he’s never had it easy. He had problems making friends in school, got in with a bad crowd, turned into the stereotypical bad boy, all spiraling into the deadbeat sitting beside me now. He’s always been around and my mother has always taken care of him. Once he showed up to my little brother’s eighth birthday rip-roaring drunk. Nobody really knows what he did to the clown, but we were reimbursed in full. At my mom’s fortieth, he fed the cake to the dog. After a while, he stopped showing up at all. The only time I thought of Uncle Teddy was when my mother was with him and not us. Now he lives in a small group of rundown apartments next to the truck driving school on route 18.
“Take me to Pizza Hut.”

“I’m taking you home.”

“But I don’t have food there. Please? I know you don’t wanna go home so soon.”

“And how do you know that?” I say.

“You know how many times I left your grandparents’ house in a huff? We got a lot in common, kid.” I cringe at the thought.

He pokes at the buttons lining his door.

“I’ll take you to Wal Mart, but you have to stay in the car.”

However brief, the ten minute drive into Fairlawn is uncomfortable. The car is filled with Uncle Teddy’s “funk,” an overwhelming mixture of cigarette smoke, sweat, alcohol and a hint of cheap cologne. I’m willing to bet the low quality of my mother’s cooking is due in no small part to the slow death of her senses of smell and taste over the years.

“Where were you tonight?” I ask. I don’t notice the stench as much when we’re talking.

“Sam’s Hide-A-Way.”

Rural Medina’s best attempt at a strip club. Classy.

“I was tryna get some money off the boys.”

“And how did that work out for you?” I gesture toward the damp sock on his left foot.

“Wait, you were at Sam’s? What were you doing on Ridge? Your house is literally down the road from there.”

His brow furrows in confusion. “I was walking home.”
I can see him getting frustrated and it reminds me of Grandpa’s Alzheimer’s. I feel bad for him. I allow his mind to rest for the remainder of the drive, hoping he’ll fall asleep.

“Can you get me a pizza? One of the real nice frozen ones? And some donuts? And Gatorade?”

“I’ll get you Subway, and a coffee.” He’s still shouting orders as I slam the door and walk away.

The floors at Wal Mart are always dirty, the aisles crowded and unorganized. The fluorescent lights flicker, creating an uneasiness among the shoppers. It’s busier than I expected for a weekday evening. I watch people walk by while I wait in line, wondering how their nights led them here. Looking down, I realize I’m in my pajamas. I can’t decide if it’s more upsetting that I’m standing in the middle of Wal Mart in my fuzzy Christmas pajama pants, or that I was wearing them before it was dark. As much as I’d like to deny it, I might belong here. The derelict locked in my car certainly suggests so.

A large woman wearing a fur coat, deep red skinny jeans and black stilettos walks by on her way to the checkouts. I wonder what her deal is. She looks like she doesn’t have a care in the world.

A loud crash echoes through the already bustling building. The sound of cans rolling along the linoleum is joined by shouting voices, Uncle Teddy’s rising above the rest. I abandon my spot in line, and make my way through the growing crowd. In the center is Uncle Teddy, sitting on the ground. Several associates stand around him. A manager attempts to coax him off the floor.

“Get off me!” he screams, waving his arms wildly. “I need a pizza!”
“Teddy, get up.” I make my way to him, tiptoeing around the now dented cans scattering the floor. I hope I won’t have to pay for those.

“Shelby, they won’t give me pizza.” He begins sobbing, and throwing cans down the aisle. “Your good-for-nothing mother cut off my allowance. What the hell am I supposed to do?” Anger swells in my chest. He pulls a flask out of some inner pocket in his jacket and takes a large swig.

“I know, Teddy. Why don’t we get up off the floor and I’ll take you home.”

He continues to cry as I help him up. He supports himself on my shoulder and we make our way toward the exit. As I look around at the dissipating crowd, I take in the looks of judgment that come with being “the rednecks who made a scene at Wal Mart.”

“Of course he belongs to pajama girl.”

When I finally get home, I hug my mom. She laughs when I don’t let go. I resent Uncle Teddy for this night. Almost more than I resent myself for being such a teenager. The image of Fur Coat Lady is etched in my mind. She shakes her head disapprovingly.

Ramona

Mel’s groans rose above the whining machinery that surrounded his bed. The brand new book of Sudoku that rested in her lap fell to the floor as Delilah reached from her seat in the corner, squeezing his morphine button between thumb and forefinger.
The room was barren, the walls white and bare, at times making Delilah feel as though she had been committed. She often studied the vibrantly decorated door of Mel’s across-the-hall neighbor, Mrs. Levitan, pangs of jealousy gnawing at the back of her mind. The small, potted fern wilting on her husband’s bedside table barely passed for decoration, but he was never one for extravagance. After three years cooped up in the same room, she wished it felt more like home, but Mel’s stubbornness only allowed her the quilt his mother had given them as a wedding gift almost fifty years ago and a drawer full of homemade cards from the grandkids. It would just have to be enough.

Delilah reached into the drawer, pulling out the most recent additions, a stack of wrinkled sheets of computer paper with the words “Get Well Soon” scrawled in red crayon and various drawings of rainbows and stick figure family portraits. A soft tap on the door prompted her to replace the cards, taking care, for Mel’s sake, to dampen the click as she shut the drawer.

Ian burst through the door, his little legs churning until he leapt into his grandmother’s arms.

“Ian! Quiet! Papa’s sleeping,” Sharon scolded as she led husband Eli and daughter Gracie into the room, each claiming one of the stiff, flat-cushioned chairs that lined the walls.

“Oh, he’s fine, sweetie,” Delilah said, ruffling his dark hair, “your ol’ dad could use some fun these days anyway. Doesn’t do anything but whine.”

“Mom,” Sharon whispered, ushering her mother away from the family, “how’s he doing?”

“It’s almost time, sweetie,” she sighed, “doctors said it could be any day.” Sharon nodded absently, regretting all the times she was too busy with Gracie’s soccer games or Eli’s philosophy department dinner parties to visit.
“I didn’t realize.” She trailed off. She took her place next to Eli, who was absentmindedly flipping through an old *Time* magazine. The kids played quietly on the floor, sipping juice boxes. Gracie was playing Mancala against herself, counting under her breath as she made each move. Ian held a crayon in his fist, scribbling pictures of his favorite dinosaurs. His tongue stuck out the side of his mouth in concentration. They had passed every Sunday this way for most of Mel’s stay at the nursing home. Per Mel’s request, Sharon dropped the kids off in the morning, allowing them to keep the old man company, and returned in the evening to pick them up. Most Sundays saw Gracie and Ian running through the halls of the nursing home, making friends with residents and nurses and mooching extra puddings off the cafeteria staff. On the occasions that Sharon and Eli could be convinced to stay for brunch, they made sure the children remained occupied and stationary.

Delilah stroked the thin, gray hair framing her husband’s face.

“Mel,” she whispered, attempting to wake him.

“Ramona,” he murmured in response. Delilah’s face reddened. Sharon and Eli exchanged a glance before resting their gazes on her. She busied herself, avoiding their eyes by flattening the wrinkles in the blankets swaddling her husband. She didn’t have to occupy herself for long, saved by the entrance of Sharon’s sister, Elise and her long-term, live-in boyfriend, Marcus.

“Sorry we’re late, mom. Marcus’s last appointment went long.” Elise dropped a purse the size of a duffle bag just inside the door with a dull thud.

“Aunt Leesy!” Ian hollered. He and Gracie ran to the door, wrapping their arms around her legs.

“Hey kiddoes.” She patted their heads. “Uncle Marcus has presents from California.”
“Appointment?” Sharon asked, raising an eyebrow. If the baggy blue jeans and bejeweled dragon t-shirt he was wearing were acceptable work attire, she wasn’t sure she wanted to know where he was employed.

“I got a gig at ‘Tat’s All Folks,’ the tattoo parlor on the square. It’s a real classy place.” Marcus rolls up both sleeves, showing off his almost solidly tatted arms. Ian pokes at a large snake with googly eyes starting at his wrist and winding up his arm, underneath his rolled sleeve.

“Ouch!” Marcus yells, flexing his arm to make the snake squirm slightly. Ian giggles.

“How nice.” Sharon smiled halfheartedly, resuming her perusal of Time’s Hurricane Sandy coverage from years before.

Elise rolled her eyes, rubbing Marcus’s arm affectionately. She knew her sister didn’t approve of her life choices, particularly her decision to remain unmarried. Any departure from tradition sent Sharon running for the hills, which is probably why the two hadn’t seen each other in years. She knew their recent move to Akron would cause trouble, but she wanted to be close to her family.

“Faith . . . Ramona,” Mel said, more loudly this time, interrupting the tension. Delilah sunk into the chair nearest his bed. Sharon raised an eyebrow at Eli suspiciously, certain of some secret scandal.

“What’d he say?” Elise asked, studying her sister’s furtive look. Gracie raised her head from the game, looking from one to the other.

“My faith . . . is in . . . Ramona,” he said firmly, pulling himself to a sitting position in bed.

“Nana, what does that mean?” Gracie asked.
“That’s a great line. I could hook you up with a tat for it,” Marcus offered. Sharon scoffed.

“Who’s Ramona?” Elise contributed.

Delilah sighed, shaking her head.

“Mom, is he . . .” she lowered her voice, “in his right mind?”

“Of course he is. He doesn’t have Alzheimer’s, Elise.” Sharon spat.

Gracie sat up, her head cocked to the side.

“Why’re you all talking about me like I’m not here?” Mel grunted. “I might be dying but I can speak for myself.”

“Everybody’s here, Mel.”

“I see that, Delilah.” He raised his eyebrows and pointed his short, chubby finger at her.

“I need to get to Ramona. You agreed.”

Sharon stepped between them, cutting her mother off from his insistent stare. “Who is Ramona, dad?”

“It ain’t a who. It’s a where,” he growled, “and your mother promised she’d take me back when it was time.”

“You’re not in any state to be goin’ anywhere Melvin Bradley,” Delilah’s eyes were daggers, warning Mel to end the conversation before it went any further.

Gracie had abandoned her solo game of Mancala, donating a pile of her marbles to keep Ian occupied in case he became disenchanted with his dinosaurs. “What’s in Ramona, Papa?”

“Well darlin’, that’s where my faith is. Buried right there under a willow tree in Ramona, Kansas.”
Eli chuckled. “I’m not sure we understand what you mean, Mel. You mean you lost your faith there?”

The old man narrowed his eyes. “No, son. I didn’t lose it. I buried it. In a mason jar, actually.”

“Superstitious old grump,” Delilah mumbled.

It was no secret that Mel wasn’t partial to his son-in-law’s pedantic arrogance. It didn’t take long when Sharon first brought Eli home for Mel to decide he wasn’t good enough for his daughter. He never completely forgave her for marrying him anyway. His only redeeming quality was his role in the creation of his grandchildren, two of only five people who could claim the soft spots in an otherwise hard heart.

“You buried it,” Eli replied, removing his glasses, placing them in the breast pocket of his suit jacket. “You can’t just bury faith, Mel. It’s intangible. Isn’t that kind of the point?”

“You can and I did. And I want it back, Delilah.”

“He’s a lunatic,” she said, shaking her head.

“Dad,” Sharon added delicately, “you can’t go anywhere right now, especially not Kansas.”

Mel glared in her direction, too desperate to accept the finality in her voice. “Delilah, please,” he pleaded, “I need to go back.” His voice was weak, emotional and physical strain apparent in each shaky syllable. Delilah stared sympathetically, remaining silent.

Elise, recognizing a subtext only her parents were cognizant of, probed deeper. “Faith in what, dad?”

Eli scoffed.
“Whatever you want to call it. God, humanity, the universe. Doesn’t matter. I buried it all.”

“But why, Papa?” Gracie questioned. She now knelt next to his bed, her chin resting on the edge. He touched the tip of her nose with his finger and winked.

“I’ll tell you the story but Professor Eli over here’s gotta take a hike. I don’t tolerate hecklers.”

Marcus and Elise erupted into a fit of laughter.

Eli rose from his chair. “Sit down,” Sharon demanded, pulling him back by the arm, “That’s not funny, dad. Just tell the story.”

“Alright, I’ll do it, but I don’t want to hear a peep,” he said, pointing to each person around the room, lingering on Eli.

“Your mother was the youngest in her family. By the time she was in school, all her brothers and sisters, all eight of ’em, were grown and out of the house. It was just her and your Grandma Weeden living in the old farmhouse. You remember it? We took you to visit once when you were kids. It had the porch that wrapped around the whole front with the white paint flaking off it. You girls used to try and see who could peel off the biggest piece.

“Every now and again her siblings would come back to visit, but one of your mom’s sisters, your Aunt Martha, you’ve never met her, she was the oldest. Well she lived in the neighborhood with her husband, Dale. When your grandma had to go shopping or help at the church or whatever came up, your mom was at their house.”

“Papa, this story isn’t about you.” Gracie said, curiosity twinkling in her eyes.

“It most certainly is, darlin’. Remember what I said? Not a peep.” He smiled, placing his shaking finger over his mouth. “Now Grandma Weeden was a very busy woman, so your mom
spent a lot of time at that house. It was nowhere near as beautiful as the farmhouse, tiny little thing, no porch or anything. Just a gray hunk of bricks. Your Aunt Martha was also a very busy woman so your mom and Dale became good friends. Well Aunt Martha and Grandma, they thought it was great how much Dale cared about your mom, how much time they spent together, how *close* the two of them were.”

The room was silent. All eyes were locked on Mel as he told the story. All eyes except Delilah’s, who sat rigid, staring straight ahead, no sign of emotion on her face. Gracie sat at her feet, her arm hooked around her grandmother’s leg. Mel took hold of his wife’s hand. They sat like this as he continued.

“They stayed that close until your mom turned thirteen. She could finally take care of herself and no one asked any questions when she stopped going over. She was growing up, finding new hobbies and friends. We met when she was twenty, went to the same school, had a couple classes together, hit it off. Yadda, yadda, Yadda.

“When we were dating, the serious kind of dating when we started talking about marriage and what to name our kids. You two were supposed to be a Jamie and an Andrew, by the way. And I’m not tellin’ who was who. Anyway, she sat me down one day, told me there was something I needed to know before we got married. She told me all about spending time at Aunt Martha’s… and Dale. She explained that she didn’t know it wasn’t normal or that anything was wrong with it and that she was scared of what might happen if she told . . .”

The nurse walked into the room, stopping Mel mid-sentence. Even little Ian fell silent, sensing it was the right thing to do even if he was unaware of the reason. The nurse’s eyes darted from person to person as she checked the old man’s vitals, the sound of his deep breaths filling the soundless void created by her presence.
“You’re doing all right, Mr. Bradley,” she said. He smiled warmly. “I’ll be back later this evening to check on you again.” Her eyes focused on the floor tiles as she left the room, avoiding the hungry stares of its occupants, all longing for the story’s conclusion. The silence lingered for a moment after the nurse’s departure, until Mel resumed.

“She finally gathered the courage to put a stop to things, and years later she gathered the courage to tell me. Together, one by one, we told her family. Grandma Weeden and all eight of her brothers and sisters. They cried with her and she healed, little bits at a time, but that was the last we saw of Aunt Martha until Thanksgiving later that year. Your Aunt Martha was a coward. She stayed with the animal, too damn scared to do what your mother did at thirteen.”

He raised an eyebrow at Ian, who had clambered onto the chair next to Eli while he was speaking and was now licking the frost off the hospital window. A T-Rex was left torso-less on the floor, and Gracie’s marbles were nowhere to be found. Eli grabbed him around the middle and plopped him into his lap, handing him his phone to play with.

“Boy’s got your brains,” Mel said. Eli chuckled nervously. “I’m glad for it. His mother’s always been too smart for her own good.” Sharon and Eli clasped hands across their armrests.

“Now, what was I sayin’? It was the last Thanksgiving we had before we were married. It was a sort of engagement celebration. All your mom’s siblings came home and we crowded around the table at the farmhouse. Had our weddin’ rings in a mason jar in the middle on top of one of those spinny things you put cakes on.” His kids chuckled and he chuckled along with them in spite of himself and soon the whole room was in a fit of laughter. “It was damn festive, all right? Straighten up, now. I’m almost through.” He took a deep breath and continued. His voice was weaker. “We were just about to dig in, when Dale walked into the house, just walked right in. He kissed Aunt Martha on the cheek, apologized for being late and sat down. Everyone was quiet.
They all just stared at their plates until your Grandma started serving the turkey. She gave that man turkey and nobody said a word. Not her mother. Not one of her brothers or sisters. Not a damn word.

“I snatched that mason jar right off the table, marched your mother outta that house and we never looked back. I buried my faith underneath that willow cause I just couldn’t have faith in a world where this happens to someone like your mother.”

He breathed a sigh of relief and dissolved into a fit of coughing. “Now who’s gonna take me to Ramona to get it back?” he groaned between heaves of air.

Eli stared at his feet, his hand still tightly clasping Sharon’s. Elise wiped a tear from her eye as Marcus tightened the arm draped around her shoulders and kissed the top of her head. Delilah swayed in her rocking chair, the only sound in the room its soft creaking and an occasional squeak from Ian, who was sprawled across his father’s lap now. Gracie sat at her feet still, absentmindedly tapping on her grandmother’s toes. Mel’s eyes were locked on Delilah, who refused to look up.

Eli exchanged a look with Sharon. He stood and swung Ian onto his shoulders. “Gracie, why don’t we all go see what they’ve got for brunch today? My tummy’s growling for some food.”

He pulled her up and she brushed off the back of her pants. He put his hand on Delilah’s shoulder and squeezed lightly as they walked past toward the door.

“Isn’t Mommy coming?” Gracie asks.

“No, sweetie. But you know what, I heard a rumor that Uncle Marcus can’t resist a good waffle.” He jerked his head toward the hall in invitation.
Marcus winked and kissed Elise’s head again. “Nobody told me there were waffles!” He scooped a snickering Gracie into his arms and they filed out.

Delilah looked up at Mel now and released his hand. “I don’t understand all this, Mel. You know you can’t go anywhere. Telling that story was an awfully manipulative thing to do.” She ran her hands through her white hair. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I need my faith, Delilah. I can’t do this part without it,” Mel said, his voice shaking.

She started to cry. Elise had crossed the room and was now locked in a tearful embrace with Sharon. Delilah rose from her rocking chair and took his face in her hands. “I want you to close your eyes with me,” she whispered.

“What the hell for, Delilah?”

“Do it, you damn fool.” He did. “We’re in Ramona, Kansas. We’re underneath your willow. A warm breeze is blowing through the wispy branches. You have a trowel. You start digging. You find the jar. Do you have the jar?”

“Course I don’t. It’s a buncha bullshit. I’m in a hospital room.”

“Close your stupid eyes. Can you see the jar?”

“I can see the whole blasted thing, but I don’t want a damn metaphorical jar, Delilah.” Delilah’s eyes snapped open. “Well, that’s what you’ve got. You’ve got a ‘damn metaphorical jar’ and you’ve got me. I’m sorry that ain’t enough for you, you old coot.”

His face softened into a sad smile. “You’re enough, darlin’. It’s just that jar. Ramona. I’ve been holding onto it forever.”

“You’ve got to deal with what you’ve got. And you’ve got me and you’ve got your girls.” She beckoned for them and they took his other hand. “Can you put your faith in us? We’ll keep it a hell of a lot better than a mason jar.”
“I think that’ll do,” he whispered.

Smiling widely, he shut his eyes, allowing the tears to fall from them in front of the women who claimed the biggest, softest spots in his heart. He squeezed their hands tightly, finally releasing with a last sigh of relief.

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A Place for Me: Cather, Wharton, and Lott – The Personal Touch

Is there still a place in the modern consumption of literature for the earnest, character-driven writing of the past? Certainly many novels and short stories being published now feature character-driven movement, but the movement of culture is changing the way stories are consumed and may further change how they are written. Ideas aren’t communicated in the same way they used to be and the writing style that many of the authors I have culled inspiration from is becoming less popular. The place for the domestic, personal tone of writers like Edith Wharton, Willa Cather and Bret Lott, while still invaluable, is less common as the general tone of society evolves beyond it.

Several of Edith Wharton’s short stories, for example, are written with long passages of exposition that focus on the internal lives of her characters. In stories like “Mrs. Manstey’s View,” Wharton grounds her readers in her fictional worlds with beautiful, detailed descriptions of the setting and exploration of the main character’s thoughts. She writes with a unique, almost domestic tone. Mrs. Manstey holds only one thing dear in her meager existence. Her mobility within her little house is limited and the view from the window in her bedroom is her escape.
from her infirmity and solitude. In one of these long paragraphs of exposition, the narrator says that Mrs. Manstey, “enjoyed, also, the sunny thaws of March, when patches of earth showed through the snow, like ink-spots spreading on a sheet of white blotting paper” (Wharton 5). This small excerpt shows Wharton’s focus on pairing her personal style of writing with the exposition that makes up the bulk of her stories. She simultaneously describes the area surrounding Mrs. Manstey’s home and introduces what matters to her main character. Because of this, any addition of dialogue is controlled and deliberate. Mrs. Manstey only speaks to her neighbors, the people she spends her days watching from her window, when it infringes on her view. Every line is written with great care. Even when it seems like the exposition might be heavy handed, it is pertinent because of the story’s closeness with Mrs. Manstey’s perspective. It is the minutiae held within her narrow view of the world that gives it magic.

At the end of the story, after Mrs. Manstey temporarily halts the construction of an addition that would obstruct the view of her neighbor’s magnolias by setting fire to the woman’s house, she dies looking out on her success, but “That day the building of the extension resumed” (14). Mrs. Manstey was able to die happily, knowing that she secured for herself the view from her bedroom window, but it only lasted as long as she did. This last line serves as a brief introduction to the dark humor that also appears in several of Wharton’s other stories. “A Journey” relies heavily on this morbid humor, but it also maintains the character-driven nature of Wharton’s stories by focusing on the main character, a conflicted woman whose husband dies in the middle of a train ride.

“A Journey” is almost completely internal, exploring the war between the main character’s own desire to reach her destination and the knowledge that notifying the train’s conductor, as she should, that her husband had died, would mean that she would be put off the
train with the deceased. It is clear that the woman is unhappy in her marriage when the narrator says, “Like two faces looking at one another through a sheet of glass they were close together, almost touching, but they could not hear or feel each other: the conductivity between them was broken” (88). More than love, the woman feels a growing sense of responsibility for her husband the sicker he becomes. When he dies mid-train ride, she is simultaneously wracked with relief and guilt for feeling relieved. She decides that “At all costs she must conceal the fact that he was dead,” allowing her selfish desire to overcome the social obligation to report it and be forced to get off the train early (93). The woman is forced to be on guard for the rest of the trip to prevent other passengers from finding out.

Similar to “Mrs. Manstey’s View,” the paragraphs of exposition in this story explain the main character’s internal struggle and any introduction of dialogue is calculated to keep the tension alive throughout. The exposition shows the woman’s agony at the thought of either her husband’s death, or her knowledge of it, being discovered. The dialogue’s purpose, then, is to threaten the security of the woman’s secret and her goal to get to her destination without anyone finding out. With each passenger’s inquiry into her husband’s well-being the tension in the story rises. As she considers the need to pretend to have no knowledge of his passing upon her arrival at the station, the narrator says, “Gradually new thoughts crowded upon her, vivid and urgent: she tried to separate and restrain them, but they beset her clamorously” (97). She gets herself into a frenzy thinking about everything she must do to keep up pretenses and winds up with a questionable fate herself.

There exists a dark, existential comedy in the antics surrounding the woman’s trip back home. If, in the preceding pages of the story there is any doubt of this, the woman’s fate in the final moment of the story drives it home. She is finally forced to face the train’s porter with the
truth and faints, hitting her head on her dead husband’s sleep compartment. Wharton ends the story ambiguously, with readers unsure of whether the woman is killed by the fall or not. It is a comic ending because all of her toils to achieve her goal are exactly what makes them fruitless.

Willa Cather’s stories feature a writing style similar to Wharton’s in their dark, situational humor and personal focus. Rather than employ the use of Dorothy Parker-esque quips and one-liners, Cather and Wharton allow the comic moments in their stories to develop with the situation. They derive humor from the choices a character makes or by putting characters at odds with their own destinies.

While both authors write in a way that feels personal and often focuses on the internal life of their main characters, Cather’s stories are written from the perspective of someone in a small world looking outward. The influence of Cather’s small-town upbringing in Nebraska is evident in stories like “Paul’s Case”; Paul is desperate to escape the oppressive rules that confine him to his home and school. He serves as an usher at the theatre and the narrator reveals that:

It was at the theatre and at Carnegie Hall that Paul really lived; the rest was but a sleep and a forgetting. This was Paul’s fairy tale, and it had for him all the allurement of a secret love. The moment he inhaled the gassy, painty, dusty odour behind the scenes, he breathed like a prisoner set free, and felt within him the possibility of doing or saying splendid, brilliant things. (Cather 179)

Uninspired by his surroundings, he feels that he is destined for greater things. He hungers for the chance to find a meaning in the big city. Paul runs away from home to get to New York City and spends several extravagant days there, living in a fancy hotel and visiting the theatre. The romance of his experience fades, however, and he faces the realization that this is as good as it gets. The narrator says, “He had a feeling that he had made the best of it, that he had lived the
sort of life he was meant to live” (188). Facing the prospect of going home to Pittsburgh, he commits suicide by jumping in front of a train. In his last moment of life, however, he regrets the decision to leave the world behind, realizing too late “the vastness of what he had left undone” (189). The effect of Cather’s personal way of writing her characters is that Paul’s regret becomes the reader’s. She makes it easy for readers to form a connection with her characters.

The same personal connection to characters can be felt in another of Cather’s stories, “Old Mrs. Harris.” Another reason the closeness is felt in these stories is the direction of their focus. In contrast to “Paul’s Case,” the small-town feeling in this story creates a finite world for the story to operate in. Paul wants to escape that life, but the with the exception of Vickie, a fictional representation of a young Cather, the characters in “Old Mrs. Harris” are all situated within a finite world. The conflict in this story is in the looming presence of the social and cultural expectations of the character’s community. While Mrs. Harris’s Southern family is considered the outsider by those in the town, their neighbor, Mrs. Rosen, is seen as the antagonistic force because of the story’s close alignment with Mrs. Harris. The southern tradition of a household run by the young and supported by the elders is at odds with Mrs. Rosen’s outside perspective that elders are to be taken care of and respected.

Mrs. Rosen’s interactions with Old Mrs. Harris are out of concern for her well-being and for the way she is treated by her family. Cather again uses exposition to show that while Mrs. Harris recognizes the cultural differences between herself and her neighbor, she doesn’t speak up because it would disrupt the natural order of things in her Southern family:

Mrs. Harris had gathered from Mrs. Rosen’s manner, and from comments she occasionally dropped, that the Jewish people had an altogether different attitude toward their old folks; therefore her friendship with this kind neighbor was almost
as disturbing as it was pleasant. She didn’t want Mrs. Rosen to think that she was “put upon,” that there was anything unusual or pitiful in her lot. (Cather 272).

The domestic nature of this story is aided by Cather choosing to develop her title character through psyche-defining paragraphs. She puts Mrs. Harris in the position of having to explain the necessity for her to fill the family role she does. Cather makes Mrs. Harris’s perspective feel important and purposeful by having the character justify herself.

If “Paul’s Case” and “Old Mrs. Harris” display the personal focus that Cather has in common with Wharton, “Flavia and her Artists” shows the dark humor the two authors also have in common. Flavia is a character fueled by delusions. She prides herself on keeping a collection of “artists” and people generally more cultured than herself in her house. She has a low level of self-awareness that breeds conflict between herself and her husband, Arthur. Flavia gets upset with Arthur because she sees him as blind to the culture she surrounds herself with. After Arthur makes a remark about the departure of an insulting and disagreeable guest, M. Roux, Flavia tells Imogen, “You can’t realize, knowing Arthur as you do, his entire lack of any aesthetic sense whatever. He is absolutely nil, stone deaf and stark blind, on that side” (Cather 25). Flavia constantly feels embarrassed by her husband and the lack of tact she perceives in his behavior as a host.

There is a slightly sad humor in this story because though Flavia believes Arthur is the embarrassment, she is blind to how she is perceived by her guests. Flavia’s guests, M. Roux in particular, represent the outside perspective. There is an irony in her embarrassment because Arthur’s motives are purely meant to keep his wife from unknowingly embarrass herself. She doesn’t realize that M. Roux’s icy demeanor is the result of her behavior and not his artistic superiority. After he leaves the mansion, M. Roux writes an article that rips into her character,
and it becomes Arthur’s mission to shield his wife from the knowledge of the public’s view of her. It is clear that the guests hold Arthur in high regard, and while discussing what he may think of Flavia’s constant influx of guests, one says:

‘Why, my dear, what would any man think of having his house turned into an hotel, habited by freaks who discharge his servants, borrow his money, and insult his neighbours? This place is shunned like a lazaretto!’ (Cather 19)

The reader pities Flavia, but her complete ignorance of how she is perceived and her willingness to blame it on Arthur make her seem ridiculous and silly. Arthur is certainly presented as the conscientious, self-aware partner in the marriage by all but Flavia, his only flaw is that he loves her. One guest observes, “This man who has thought so much and lived so much, who is naturally a critic, really takes Flavia at very nearly her own estimate” (20). Arthur and Flavia wind up being equally ridiculous. Flavia’s high self-esteem and unjustifiably large ego make her almost unbearable to the people she invites into her home and Arthur’s devotion to her removes him from their esteem because he refuses to take opportunities to bring her down a notch. It is a hysterically sad union because both operate to the detriment of the other and yet cannot operate without each other.

Cather and Wharton have very similar writing styles structurally and even, at times, thematically. Both feature a domestic, personal focus on their characters and often pair it with a dark humor that mirrors life in many ways. Bret Lott’s novel The Man Who Owned Vermont is a more modern example of the use of this tone. While Lott is definitely not on the same level as Wharton and Cather, his novel gives an idea of the personal story translated into contemporary culture. The Man Who Owned Vermont has an extremely focused perspective, from the point of view of Rick Wheeler, an RC cola vendor who has recently separated from his wife. Lott writes
from an earnest perspective that can be found in both Cather and Wharton’s writing. He focuses on the workaday life of Rick Wheeler, making him into an everyman type of character experiencing extenuating circumstances.

The novel is driven by the looming presence of the past and Rick’s regret, with intermittent flashback scenes of fights between Rick and his wife and of her miscarriage at a gas station to explain the reasons behind him throwing himself into his work. There is little exposition related to his thoughts on his separation or the emotional effect it has on him, but, as with Cather and Wharton, this seems like a deliberate choice. The personal element of the novel is in the “present time” moments when Rick is burying himself in his RC cola sales. It becomes clear that he is trying to occupy his mind with anything other than his emotions.

Lott also communicates a domestic tone by writing about a marriage on the rocks. Writing the novel from Rick’s point of view presents a one-sided account of his wife’s miscarriage. Rick’s is a perspective that has a tendency to self-focus, uncomprehending in the face of someone else’s thoughts. The dialogue in this novel, particularly the conversations between Rick and Paige, are the only sense of an outside perspective. When Rick doesn’t realize that Paige would be plagued by her own miscarriage, she gets angry, saying:

‘Did you manage to forget that I was the one who miscarried? It’d been inside me. You think it was all your fault. You’d love to think the whole thing was designed just so you could feel pain, but that’s not true.’ (Lott 96)

Paige’s presence in the novel challenges its self-centered perspective and provides a much needed opposing force to Rick’s point-of-view.
The place for a writing style like Lott, Cather and Wharton’s seems to be diminishing. My own writing style often features the same earnest, domestic and personal tones that these authors employ. As society evolves beyond letter-writing, and the definition of “high society” changes, this tone is certainly less common than it used to be. Bret Lott’s novel is not the best example of it being used successfully today. There are some clear flaws in the structure of his novel and the development of his characters, but it still represents the attempt to reach for that tone. I suppose it’s also easier stomached in short stories like Cather and Wharton’s, as *The Man Who Owned Vermont* isn’t as successful. I’m left to wonder if there’s a place for me in the modern consumption of literature if I’m writing from this perspective. This worry, however, is rooted out of concern for the possibility of commercial success, which is not the goal. As long as someone is honestly and naturally writing from this perspective, someone will want to read it.
Works Cited

